

HISTORY OF GRAY'S INN IN 20 OBJECTS No.11

THE DE GREY ARMS

MASTER TIMOTHY SHUTTLEWORTH

Of all the 'Objects' spread across the Inn that mean so much for our history and identity, one sits foremost as our most important link with the past. It is the family arms of the de Greys of Wilton who owned Gray's Inn until 1506 and whose name the Society bears.

If you walk down from the Holborn Gate to South Square keep your head high as you approach the Benchers' Entrance because you will see in the pediment above the portico the de Grey arms on a shield made up of a barry of six, ie three white bars running horizontally across the shield alternating with three azure.

The de Grey arms was used by the Inn until the Griffin badge was adopted at some time between 1594 and 1606. It was not known why the de Grey arms was abandoned but in *Gray's Inn: A Short History*, published in 1997, the late Master Richard Stone gives this traditional explanation, having confirmed the timeline mentioned above:

'... the griffin was probably adopted from the arms of Richard Aungier who was Reader four times and Treasurer three times ... The change was made not only to honour Richard Aungier, but also because an Indian griffin segreant was a far more spectacular badge for the "Shows" in which the theatrical talent of the Inn was engaged, than the plain bars of the de Grey arms.'

That account has been embraced without challenge or modification by the Inn's website in its historical commentary. But, while it seems plausible, it may not be the truth – at least not entirely so, when there exists a much more likely explanation, which, rather surprisingly, has been overlooked by past historians of the Inn. Here I shall argue that the change was largely forced on the Inn by political circumstances.

The first Baron de Grey of Wilton, Sir Reginald de Grey, died in 1308. He was also the first of the de Greys to own the Manor of Purpoole, later known as Gray's Inn. Between 1308 and 1603 there were 14 more de Greys, Barons of Wilton, including Thomas Grey, the 15th Baron, who inherited the title in 1593. He was the last of his line to hold the peerage and why he forfeited it is crucial to the debate.

Thomas Grey was born in about 1573. Although commissioned as colonel of horse in 1599 by the Earl of Essex when the latter was Lord Deputy in Ireland, Grey soon fell out so badly with both Essex and his close associate the Earl of Southampton that in early 1601 he was sent to the Fleet Prison for assaulting Southampton. Quickly released, he helped to suppress the Essex



Rebellion only weeks later and sat on the commission that condemned Essex and his co-conspirator Southampton to death.

On the accession of James I, Grey became identified with the 'Bye Plot', which planned to seize the King to force on him religious tolerance (Grey was a Puritan), though how seriously he was implicated in the plot is open to considerable doubt. He was arrested and convicted of treason and sentenced to death. His crime led to forfeiture of his lands, and all his honours and titles were extinguished. Grey was taken to the scaffold on 10 December 1603, but was dramatically reprieved by the King and returned to the Tower, where he remained until his death in 1614.

That the Inn was closely identified with the Grey family and gave pride of place to their coat of arms was now seriously embarrassing. Even without overwhelming pressure, it would have been unthinkable for the Benchers and gentlemen of the Inn to retain the Grey coat of arms in the circumstances. Men like Sir Francis Bacon, prominent at the Inn and recently knighted by James, and his cousin Sir Robert Cecil, scion of a great family long associated with Gray's and still Secretary of State, would have been mortified by the events, especially the former who saw his ambitions resting heavily on preferment in the new reign.

The students of the Inn, too, would have pressed for a new badge which they could proudly display at their masques at the Inn and entertainments at Court, or blazoned on their banners when, at the Christmas revels, they often rode in state – magnificently arrayed – with the Prince of Purpoole at the head of a mock royal court, to Crosby Place to be greeted by the Lord Mayor.

It was Thomas Grey's disgrace that was surely the trigger that brought about the urgent need to replace the de Grey arms at the Inn. If the Benchers had not made the change, they would have needed to work very hard to obliterate Grey's disloyalty. ■